

THE BRITISH RULE AND GOZO 1800-1964

Joseph Bezzina

On 28 October 1798, the flag of the British Empire fluttered for the first time upon the Maltese archipelago from Saint John Cavalier within the Gozo Citadel. That day the French troops on Gozo under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Lockey surrendered to Captain Alexander John Ball who had been sent earlier by the British Rear Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson to organize the blockade against the French. Yet as recorded in a letter written by Ball off Gozo and despatched to Nelson, “the place was [later on] delivered up in form to the deputies of the island”.

The Gozitans remained masters of their own island for twenty two months, until the French troops capitulated in Malta on 5 September 1800, when the whole archipelago passed under the protection of the British Crown.

Gozo at the time had one town and seven villages or parishes, as it was the establishment of a Roman Catholic parish that raised the status of a hamlet to that of a village. In 1800, the population was close to 16,000. In March 1842, according to the first census taken by the British, the population was 14,342; of these 6809 or 47.5 percent were males and 7533 or 52.5 percent were females. These figures include 12 foreigners living in Gozo on census day. The population, after an initial decline in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, began rising steadily to climb to 20,003 by 1901 and to 25,975 by 1967.

Taking in consideration the political, economic, social, cultural and religious factors, the British rule in Gozo may be divided for convenience into the following five periods:

1. 1800-1814, a time of instability, yet some prosperity;
2. 1814-1842, the years of poverty and depression up to the first census;
3. 1842-1887, a period of innovations and reforms;
4. 1887-1921, from a majority of elected members to self-government; and
5. 1921-1964, the struggle towards independence.

The Early Nineteenth Century

Malta and Gozo passed informally under British protection on 5 September 1800. On 27 March 1802, through the Peace of Amiens, the islands were restored to the Order of the Knights of Saint John. Several steps were taken in that direction, but to the satisfaction of the Maltese the restoration did not materialize. The informal protection prolonged itself for several years. Finally, by the Peace of Paris of 30 May 1814, the archipelago was to belong "in full rights and sovereignty to His Britannic Majesty." It was a sovereignty acquired not by force of arms but founded on the "love of the Maltese and the voice of Europe."

The first period of British rule was a time of considerable instability, yet some prosperity was not wanting. The two main sources of income under the previous government of the Knights were foreign revenue accruing from the Knights' extensive properties in Europe and the export of cotton. Literally, all the people of the island shared from this income which came to an abrupt end with the change in government. The disturbance in these two sources was however cushioned by the commerce generated as an effect of the continental system. The system launched by Napoleon barred British trade with continental Europe and as a result a good number of British firms established branches in Malta to develop clandestine commerce with Italy and the continent. Malta also became an important entrepôt.

The Gozitans benefited indirectly from the boom. Their cereals and agricultural products brought higher prices in Valletta momentarily substituting the Knights' spending and the cotton industry. The boom was ushered off by a plague epidemic in 1814. It bogged trade in a morass of quarantine restrictions made by other Mediterranean ports on Malta. The people began feeling the full effects of the change in their traditional sources of income.



The Banca Giuratale (Rabat) enlarged and redesigned by the British to centralise the administration of the island (1875).

The 1814-1842 Period

By the passage of years, the British had fully understood the strategic importance of the islands for their expanding Empire and though Malta and Gozo were formally handed over to the British in 1814, the British had formally decided to stay the previous year. On 16 July 1813, through the General Instructions handed to Sir Thomas Maitland, the first colonial Governor, they gave Malta its first Constitution — twelve were to be given throughout their rule, the last granted independence to the archipelago.

The first British Governor took several drastic steps vis-à-vis Gozo. So as to have absolute say in the local administration, on 15 October 1814, he suppressed the post of Governor of Gozo. The suppression of the *Universitas*, the local municipal Council that had functioned since around 1397, followed suit unceremoniously on 31 December 1818.

To help him in the government of the island, on 25 June 1815, he chose six *luogotenenti*, one for each of the six districts in which the islands were divided. These were in turn helped by deputies in each village. The *Luogotenente* for Gozo, the sixth district, was a resident in Malta and he had six deputies to help him. He could not care less for far off Gozo but,

as a matter of fact, he had hardly any say in the administration. Things remained unchanged under his successors and the creation of a Council of Government through a Constitution granted on 1 April 1835 did little to meliorate the situation.

This centralization of the administration led to the elimination of Gozo from the picture and the island was left in a complete state of abandonment. The British who had so willingly replaced the Order did precious little to substitute the foreign revenue previously spent in the island. Besides, due to several reasons, the cotton industry had failed. The result was widespread poverty. As attested by the 1836 Royal Commission instituted to inquire into the affairs of Malta and Gozo, poverty reigned supreme on Gozo.

The Gozitans however began working out their own salvation. One example suffices. The *Collegio del Gozo*, the only school on the island at that time, had a book, *Trattat fuq l-Obbligi tal-Bniedem*, printed in Livorno, Italy. An increase in education, it was correctly concluded, would help the people to better their low standard of living.

Innovations and Reforms

The year 1842 marks the beginning of better times. On 21 March 1842, the Government took the first census of modern times. Until that time, no real count had been made of the population, so much so that the census proved current estimates to be 14.85 percent too high for Gozo. Better planning could henceforth be made for the benefit of the island. Around the same time the British authorities voted the money for the first large public building enterprise in Gozo: the Ghar Ilma — Citadel aqueduct. It was such major public works that relieved, even if temporarily, the widespread poverty. Inaugurated on 6 September 1843, this aqueduct not only brought sufficient water to the town of Gozo, but also provided some income for a large number of unemployed.

On 11 May 1849, in the third Constitution granted to Malta, the British created a Council of Government with eighteen members. Eight were to be elected from one each of the eight districts in which the islands were divided. In Gozo, the eighth district, 281 persons were entitled to vote for

The British Rule and Gozo: 1800-1964

the Gozo candidate; of these only 128 resided in Gozo, the other 153 were Malta residents (including 34 priests) qualified to vote for the Gozo candidate by property at Gozo and Comino. 259 voted; Adrian Dingli, a lawyer of Gozitan extraction, was elected with 117 votes.

Malta and Gozo were slowly witnessing an economic revival. It was ushered in during the Crimean War (1854-56) when the large movement of troops through the island revived commerce on a grand scale. Eventually, the opening of the Suez Canal on 17 November 1869, brought an increasingly number of ships to the island. These events led to a revival in other fields. After 1846 the lace industry began to be organized on professional lines. In 1855, the first grand scale Industrial and Agricultural show was organized on the feast of *Santa Marija*. As a result local agricultural products and handicrafts became more in demand.

Big strides forward were also made in the field of education. Up to 1842, there was only a single primary school at Rabat. Then several others were inaugurated: in 1842 at Nadur, in 1859 at Gharb, and in 1862 at Xaghra and Xewkija. An upper primary school, something between a primary and a secondary institution, was opened in 1851. A full secondary school offering both arts and science subjects was opened by the church as an annex to the Seminary on 4 November 1866. A public library was founded on 21 November 1853 and it was eventually transferred to the present specifically built premises in March 1896.

Most means of communications were also upgraded. In 1848, a telegraph station made possible the transmission of messages between the islands. After 1862, when the Mgarr-Nadur road was built, a better road network began to take shape. But most important of all was the inauguration, after a government subsidy, of a reliable steamer service between the islands. On 13 June 1885, the "Gleneagles" became the first iron screw steamer to operate between Malta and Gozo with the result that traffic and commerce made big steps forward.

The Government civil service was reshuffled from the 1850s onwards, and in 1875, the Banca Giuratale (built 1733-38) was enlarged to serve as Gozo's administrative centre. Without doubt the most salient event during the period under consideration was the establishment of the Diocese of Gozo with full British backing on 16 September 1864. The

British not only did not pose any obstacles in the erection of a new bishopric, but even showed themselves favourable to the Gozitan wishes. The autonomy gained as a result by the Gozo Church led public spirited citizens to seek better treatment for Gozo in other fields too.

Towards Self-Government

During the 1870s, the elected members split into Reformists (pro-English) and anti-Reformists (not anti-reform as in fact they were more liberal, but anti-English and thus, automatically, pro-Italian). Their leaders eventually succeeded in piloting a better Constitution, granted by Letters Patent of 12 December 1887. The elected members of the Council became a majority and the Council had power to legislate on most matters relating to internal affairs and also controlled finances. Due to a chain of events, most especially because of successive divisions in the Council over policies of expenditure, on 3 June 1903, the Colonial Office revoked the previous Constitution and granted another that witnessed a reversal to the 1849 situation.

1887 marked the Golden Jubilee of the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne. After a petition promoted by local Anglophiles, on 10 June 1887, the centuries-old name of Rabat, the town of Gozo, was officially changed to that of Victoria, and the town was elevated to the status of a city.

Among the most significant progress during this period, one can point out the opening of schools in the other villages of Gozo, the organization of evening classes in existing schools for those adults desiring to learn to read and write, as well as the inauguration of district libraries in the same school premises. For the entertainment of the people, in 1910, the Government began the laying out of the public gardens inaugurated as Villa Rundle, after Governor of the day Sir Leslie Rundle, in 1914.

The 1880s also witnessed an unprecedented movement for the emancipation of women. This was the side effect of the foundation of two female congregations: the Franciscans of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1880, and the Dominicans of Saint Catherine of Siena in 1889. Both of the Congregations had the declared object to cater for the education and training of poor girls to enable them to earn a living. Eventually, both played an important role in the local social field.



A commemorative inscription within the Citadel: the British connection continues.

The Post-1921 Period and the Road to Independence

By Letters Patent of 14 April 1921, the British Government decided to give Malta a Parliament with wide self-governing powers — a most important step in the Maltese process of state formation. The election that followed in October saw the emergence of the first Gozo party, the Partito Democratico Nazionalista of Enrico Mizzi, a party which contested the Gozo district only and elected the four candidates it fielded: Enrico Mizzi, Luigi Camilleri, Guzè Micallef, and Alfons Maria Hili. The first Maltese Parliament was inaugurated on 1 November 1921.

Initiative in local affairs passed from British to local hands. One of the most important enterprises in the pre-war era was the inauguration of the first power station on 1 August 1926, though it was to take thirty years before electric current could be distributed throughout the island. On 23 June 1929, the Government initiated the modernization of Mġarr harbour by the building of a breakwater. Construction went on until 1935, but by summer 1932, steamers began, for the first time, to berth alongside and discharge passengers and cargo directly onto the quay.

During the Second World War (1940-1943), Gozo was declared a non-military zone and hence a place of refuge. Thousands of people from Malta found refuge on the island. This did generate a large amount of commerce but it also created many problems.

The post-war years witnessed a general revival. As the process proved slower in Gozo, several public spirited citizens, led by the lawyer Dr Francesco Masini, founded the Gozo Party to hasten the process. Its foundation made it clear to one and all that "Gozo is out to make its voice heard." The party gained three of the five seats from the Gozo district in the October 1947 election and throughout the 1947-50 legislature they went out of their way to revitalize the island's economy and modernize its infrastructure. Very significant for Gozo's future was the programme of enlargement of existing schools and the building of modern ones to cater for the post-war baby-boom.

The 1950s witnessed several political upheavals and in April 1958, the islands passed once again under a colonial administration. That same year, other public spirited citizens formed the Gozo Civic Committee to press forward the island's needs. After petitioning the British authorities, the Governor, Admiral Sir Guy Grantham, got the approval from the Colonial Office for the formation of the Gozo Civic Council. On 14 April 1961, the Council was formally established as a statutory local Government and it became responsible for local affairs. Though dominated by extreme parochialism, it proved on the whole beneficial to the island until its abolishment on 4 December 1973.

After gaining once more a degree of self-government in February 1962, the Nationalist Party, who had won the election, immediately sought independence from Great Britain. Malta and Gozo became a sovereign state within the Commonwealth on 21 September 1964.

Select Bibliography

Bezzina, Joseph (1985). *Religion and Politics in a Crown Colony. The Gozo-Malta Story, 1798-1864*. Valletta.

Joseph Bezzina, Joseph (1995). *Francesco Masini, founder of the Gozo Party (1894-1962)*. Gozo (Malta): Gaulitana 14.

Mallia-Milanes, V. (ed) (1988). *The British Colonial Experience 1800-1964. The Impact on Maltese Society*. Malta: Mireva.